Finally, a city official who seems to truly value diversity

OPINION

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GUEST COLUMNIST

Vice-Mayor Larry Small is one of the last people in this city with whom I would expect to find common ground. He's Briargate; I'm Manitou. He's Air Force Academy; I'm CC. He's Starbucks; I'm Wooglin's.

Non-metaphorically speaking, he's a straight, white, conservative, Republican male sexagenarian residing on the right side of the street, while my liberal, gay, Hispanic twenty-something female self happily lounges on the opposite side.

But this is a lesson in why labels are dangerous. It's an optimistic glimmer of a future in which stances on issues are formed independently of party lines. Where a Democrat can be pro-life and a Republican can be pro-gay rights.

Recently, the Vice Mayor shed these labels in an act that was surprising to those on both sides of the street — he issued a public statement of support for the Colorado Springs gay pride festival.

Rather than applauding his independent thinking, however, these editorial pages criticized it, saying that support from public officials like Small for a private event like PrideFest was irrelevant.

The Gazette is accurate to a certain extent; even Small agrees that PrideFest would have gone on with or without his letter of support. "I agree with the Gazette in principle. It [my letter of support] doesn't matter — their event has it's value and I added no value to their event — it was going to happen anyway."

But what the Gazette is missing is the meaningful symbolism behind Small's letter. Sure, Gavin Newsome's public support of the San Francisco PrideFest is pretty irrelevant — it's San Francisco after all! Of course the mayor supports the event! But Colorado Springs? The Vice Mayor of Colorado Springs issues a public letter of support for a gay event? Now that's a symbolic gesture of substance.

That's a clear message to our citizens, our neighbors, and the rest of the country that we are not the backwards, intolerant, religious zealots that we have been labeled as. That just because Ted Haggard and James Dobson might be the most vociferous of our community, they do not represent the majority. That instead, our city is filled with those like Larry Small, who yes, may be conservative, and religious, and Republican, but at the end of the day still understand the importance of tolerance.

Small gets this symbolism. "I think it is important for someone like me to stand out and make that recognition of *our* gay community because they are a part of the community" (emphasis mine). He gets that making community members feel valued, appreciated and included can only be a boon for our city.

Just the other week the Gazette reported a snippet on Operation 60 Thirty-Five that alluded to this truism. Operation 60 Thirty-Five is an initiative aimed to develop an economic strategy plan for our city. The consulting firm leading the effort explained how our city's religious conservative reputation was a limiting factor in our ability to attract companies from the lucrative emerging tech and renewable energy industries (Translation: the intolerance effect has real economic consequences).

Attracting such companies is critical to being the vibrant, successful city we all envision. Having a more tolerant and accepting reputation aids in our ability to attract said companies. Ergo being more tolerant and accepting will help us build a more successful, vibrant city. Anything our elected officials can do to further this transition should therefore be applauded and encouraged, instead of criticized and denounced. You don't even have to believe in equal rights for your gay and lesbian neighbors; but you can't deny that being a more embracing and inclusive community is the key to a thriving 21st Century economy, and ultimately, city.

At least one of our City Councilors seems to understand this.

Kristin Lynch is an advisory member of the Gazette's editorial/opinion board. E-mail her at opinion@gazette.com

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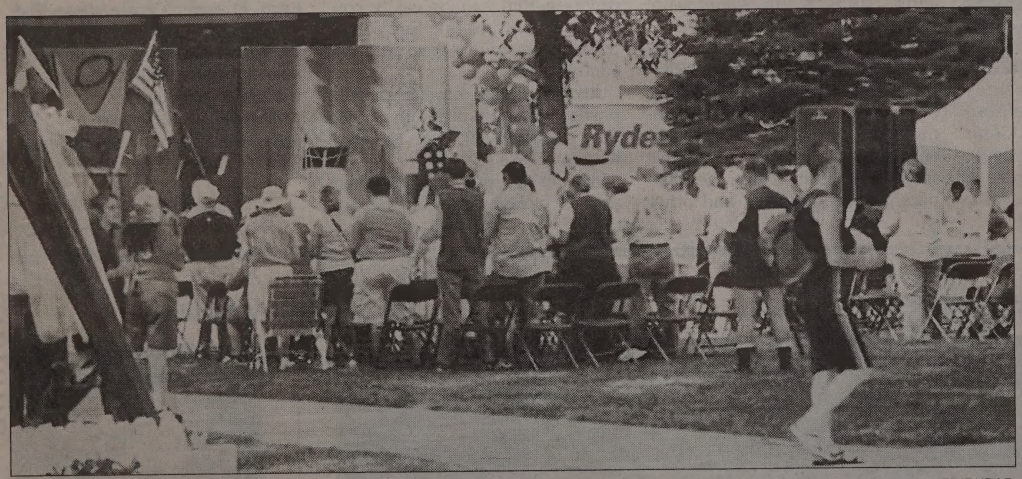
YOUR DIVERSITY

PRIDEFEST PREPARES FOR 19TH CELEBRATION



DAWN HUGHES, YOURHUB CONTRIBUTOR

Events will continue throughtout the weekend at PrideFest. The Pride Parade is scheduled for noon Sunday. Check www.yourpridecenter.org for a schedule of PrideFest events.

All invited to attend annual fetsivities

BY DAWN HUGHES
YOURHUB CONTRIBUTOR

Colorado Springs has a long tradition. It all started in 1991, when, in the streets near Colorado College, members of our community decided that it was important to stand up to discrimination.

That day marked Colorado Springs' first PrideFest. This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots in New York. This milestone makes Colorado Springs 19th PrideFest especially significant! All are welcome to the annual festivities in and around Acacia Park this weekend. Please join us to celebrate our LGBT community, and the gift of diversity.

Some of the activities taking place: Thursday, 6 p.m., PrideFest Volunteer Party at the Pride Center. Volunteer at PrideFest@YourPrideCenter.org.

Friday, 8 p.m., Gay Pride Pageant (Mr. Ms. Miss Gay Pride 2009) at the Underground.

Saturday, 8:15 p.m., movie screening "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" at Cornerstone Arts Center (CC Campus), free admission.

Sunday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Pride Fair at Acacia Park, and Pride Parade at noon on Tejon Street.